



# Information Brief

## Parent Involvement

*Involvement of parents in the education of their children is critical to their children's success in school. Despite our awareness of the importance of this involvement, schools and families continue to struggle to establish meaningful communication, engage parents in the day-to-day life of the school, and achieve common ground given the diversity of the population in background, experience and thought. Nevertheless, schools continue to seek ways to improve their work with parents. The importance of this effort has never been more clear than it was as people sought answers to the "what might have been" questions raised by the tragic school shootings across our country.*

### CRITICAL ELEMENTS ADDRESSED:

- *Districts and schools, with families and community members, establish a philosophy and develop policies that recognize and support families as partners in their children's education.*
- *Families and schools communicate clearly and frequently with each other.*
- *Schools support families to be partners in their children's education.*
- *Families support their children's education.*
- *Schools provide families with opportunities for meaningful involvement in the school.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the United States, schools today are attempting to increase parent involvement in order to strengthen the bonds between home and school. Although studies have rarely addressed the issue of parent involvement in schools as a deterrent to school violence, it is positively associated with student academic success, higher attendance rates, lower suspension rates, and the prevention of problem behaviors, including violence (Skiba and Strassell, 2000).

### THE IMPACT OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Research on parenting has identified five parenting practices that are instrumental in the upbringing of well-adjusted children. They are:

- 1) Fair, consistent, and predictable discipline;
- 2) Parental monitoring and supervision of a child's activities, whereabouts, and peer associations;
- 3) Parent involvement in their children's lives in either structured or unstructured activities;
- 4) Positive parenting by establishing warm, caring relationships, mutual respect, and affection; and
- 5) Use of crisis intervention, conflict resolution and problem solving to deal with the minor crises that arise in children's lives.

*-Walker, 2001*

When parents teach their children positive attitudes toward school and perceive education as a highly valued activity, they help their children get a good start in school, thus enhancing their probability for academic achievement and healthy social development (Walker, 2001). Attendance rates have increased and suspension rates have decreased in schools implementing aggressive plans to involve parents in the process. One Iowa school reports an increase in attendance following improved

communication with and involvement of parents in the development and implementation of stricter attendance rules. Increased parent involvement also has been shown to lead to greater teacher satisfaction, improved parent understanding and parent-child communication, and more successful and effective school programs (Skiba and Strassell, 2000).

Some programs focus their efforts on the parents of students with challenging behavior. One elementary school in California required parents of students at risk of expulsion to attend

regular meetings to develop a solution regarding their child's behavior. Both parents and teachers rated the collaborative team approach as highly

successful. Parent Management Training (PMT), teaching parents effective methods of behavior management to decrease their children's aggressive behavior, also has been used with families of students exhibiting aggressive or disruptive behavior (Skiba and Strassell, 2000).

***"We cannot bring out the best in children if we are not willing to give our best!"***

*- Dr. Steve Edwards, Principal  
East Hartford (CN) H.S.*

### ***Parent Involvement at School: Making it Work***

When trying to involve parents in school activities, school administrators need to take into account the background of the parents. Parents may be uncomfortable participating at school because they, themselves, did not have good experiences there; the only communication about their child that they receive from school is negative; or they do not communicate well because of language barriers, or cultural and socio-economic differences.

Dr. Steven Edwards is the principal of East Hartford High School in Connecticut, an urban high school of 2100 with 72 percent students of color and 40 languages spoken. He understood these issues when he rented an apartment in the projects where his students resided. There he could meet with their parents in surroundings where they were comfortable. Parent involvement increased in his school, and the focus on relationship building helped to eliminate expulsions, decrease suspensions by 50 percent, decrease the drop out rate by 3.5 percent, and improve standardized achievement test scores.

How can schools build trust with parents? Making an attempt to reach parents and to make their experiences at school meaningful and comfortable needs to be part of an overall goal to increase parent involvement. Some suggestions for improving relationships include the following:

- **Clearly define parent involvement expectations.** Are parents serving on committees? What might the responsibilities be? Are parents going to help in the classroom? What are they expected to do? How often? What hours of the day?
- **Boost parents' feelings of involvement in important decisions and events concerning their child's school.** When parents know that they have a part in decision-making, they take ownership of the school and take pride in its accomplishments.
- **Convenience should be the order of the day.** Many parents are not available during the day. Offer opportunities for involvement on weekends or evenings.
- **Make parent involvement at school meaningful and worth the time parents invest at school.** Center activities on the wants and needs of families. Include students and other siblings in your plans.
- **Develop multiple ways that parents can be involved.** Some parents may feel more comfortable if they can be involved by working on projects that fit their areas of expertise. By bringing their work talents to school, they are able to make an immediate connection.
- **Extend the effort to involve parents that are the hardest to approach.** Use every available resource. Make telephone calls. Send notices of involvement opportunities home with children. Mail letters. Ask other parents who may be close to the family to extend an invitation to school events. Some schools have been successful approaching parents through community activities and churches.

#### LEARN MORE ABOUT IT:

- **Web sites:**
  - Partnership for Family Involvement in Education: <http://pfie.ed.gov/>
  - Strengthening Families: <http://www.exnet.iastate.edu/Pages/families/SFP.html>
- **Email:**
  - Remarkable Partnerships: [beth-larson@home.com](mailto:beth-larson@home.com)
  - Parents As Partners: [higherplain@home.com](mailto:higherplain@home.com)
- **In this Handbook:** See "Success4 Critical Elements," and other briefs in this section.

Training programs intended to improve the level of parent involvement in school are available to Iowa schools.

Two of these programs focus on parent-child communication. *Strengthening Families*, developed by Iowa State University Extension, is one of the scientifically evaluated programs recognized as exemplary by the U.S. Department of Education. This program, designed for youth from 10-14 years of age and their parents, helps improve communication between parents and their children, helps parents set limits, and helps youth develop skills to resist peer pressure. *Parents as Teachers* provides numerous support contacts for both parents and staff.

*Remarkable School-Home Partnerships* is a third program available in Iowa that more directly targets relationships between parents and schools. This training helps schools convene conversations with parents and community members about things that matter. Participants explore possibilities for expanding parent and community involvement in school improvement efforts and build skills for effective communication.

#### **Parent Involvement in School: Making Schools Safe**

Increasingly, parents are asking to play a role in helping the school to become a safe place. Indeed they have an important contribution to make to the overall safety of the school beyond what they do to guide their own children from violent behavior. Recommended strategies for parent involvement in school safety issues are: 1) serving on an advisory body to counsel schools on matters of policy and the challenges of keeping the school safe; 2) advocate for parents to teach their children non-violent ways to deal with conflict; 3) advocate for securing weapons at home and gun safety instruction for families; and 4) make available to parents information on effective parenting practices and facilitate their access to training and support on effective parenting (Walker, 2001).

#### **SUMMARY**

Involvement with children's education begins at home when parents establish an environment where learning is valued, teach their children the social, emotional, and behavioral skills they will need to succeed in school, and show their children that their schoolwork is important. Involvement continues into the school when there is open communication among parents, children, and school, and parents are provided with a wide range of opportunities to participate in the daily life of their child there. Every school will be improved and the life of every child enhanced by the active involvement and support of parents in school.